

ERIC MILLER

A DIALOGUE CONCERNING CHICKENS

Summer, 1793

NIGHT HAS LONG SINCE FALLEN beside a chicken coop on the banks of the Niagara River. Indistinguishable in near-total dark stand Anne Cowper (governess), Natty Collins (governess), Elizabeth Simcoe (wife to the Governor of Upper Canada), Thayendanegea (also known as Captain Brant—Mohawk leader), Charles Trump (Steward, formerly a poultry thief), and the Cornplanter (Seneca leader).

Is it a grove or a clearing? Shadow and perfume are substantial things. By this light they equal solidity. Even to wield one's senses is to transplant delicious, mysterious masses in order to make one's way. Glide Anne, glide Natty, glide Elizabeth too! Cassie prepares the way, her sensorium transposing the great shapes without damaging them—avoiding or rolling them aside with a gratification to their whole revolving circumference. It is sweet, grave toil to feel one's way by night on the spicy earth. A blur of clucking proves other wills make a path here too. Glide? Not quite, we stumble too, but the stumbling itself partakes of the smoothness that is blackness, constant even when interrupted. Aroma and crooning saturate eclipse. Womanhood and manhood! No cock struts before his wives at this dusk hour or at this curious *gallinarium*. Sexes are gone with the light. Slow sensuality abolishes the difference it heightens.

"Men and women," Thayendanegea says in the direction of Natty, dark as the beautiful time of day, "hardly make a contrast. The diagnostic feature of human life is drifting off to sleep."

"*Somniculose* of you," pronounces Cassie, who realizes she has for years waited to release this word from between drowsy lips.

The clucking of the chickens is like a drug. Eyelids fill with sleep. The colour of eyes has vanished.

Says Anne, "We have accomplished enough for today."



Pierce Tempest, *A Broody Hen Surrounded by Her Chicks* (c. 1690)

Credit: Welcome Collection (CC BY)

“The moment of saying that is a moment that always comes,” says Natty, “and when it comes, whether later or sooner, it is the greatest moment of the day.”

Anne falls off from the sublimity of expressing everyone’s daily satisfaction. “Of all the noise that could be made,” she says, “these birds produce the noise most consonant with the change of state of things.”

She has her eyes, she thinks, on a pine branch. The needles maintain the least palpable distinction from their second selves of shadow as a close flock keeps close its double, its society of muttering. Meaning, Miss Cowper would allege, is not another thing, but the distension and development of the same thing. She frowns but cannot parse intrinsic from extrinsic. Yet the hen is not her egg surely. The crease in her brow deranges in the mildest degree the even fabric of the trailing night.

“There are all kinds of consummations,” agrees Captain Brant.

“We would be happier had we the art to detect them. Our life has as many heights as a lake of waves,” says Charles from somewhere. They had not thought him among their number just now.

Anne would say that there is always traversing the sphere of our hearing a murmur of consummation, a creek dark in its banks and dark in the night, a sluice of stars doing the minimum to be bright.

“The intensest things,” she says, “are not intense to the things themselves that make us think, ‘How intense!’”

It is intimacy without content, she thinks. That is what it is. The raging sun itself is fast asleep. What intimacy (without content though it may be), contentedly surrendering to the impersonality of slumber.

Captain Brant says, “Some would have us sleep so as to take advantage of us. But they do not understand the resources, defences, and innovations in sleep. You may fight and win in that state against those whose vigilance would never permit the like to themselves.”

Miss Cowper thinks of her own eloquence and how the hens, if that is what these unseen beings are, foster her eloquence in their wordlessness. We learn not what it is wished that we should learn from what others in the brittleness of fatigue or the sumptuousness of weariness call “nature.” It is not nature: it is what is around us. Human beings are the smaller aspect of that, human meanings still smaller. Secrecy without duplicity, secrecy proof against exposure. How sweet to drop the egg, she thinks and blushes.

Lady Simcoe allows, “Shadows mass us together and give us mass. We

become a massif (if you will) arranged as one in the intimation of a shared sleepiness, and the kindly gibber of hens preens us in this pregnancy of which they alone are partner. The egg never gets more swollen than what we first see there in the straw.”

She would say that this is the truth of the matter. One’s child is simple, and one’s child is complex. She would also say that whatever is strong in her came from sleeping. Ironically, enemies sometimes advise it.

“Zephyr’s egg,” says Thayendanega. “I have heard it said the hen lays a wind-egg because she has enjoyed the imagination of love. That will do. It is, however, not fertile . . .”

“Sterility itself is fertile,” corrects Cassie. “Who would deny that most of the time we are as good as sterile and fertile in that sterility. What is fertility?”

“‘Hen,’ asserts the Cornplanter, avoiding the cluster of questions, “is a finer English word than ‘chicken.’”

Natty agrees, “‘Hen’ catches how one crowds against the other, the half dozen or more of them form a greater chicken closer set than the blocks of the stonemason, hen leans on hen, the sharp-tipped heads subside in the haze of expanded fellowship.”

Says Anne, “They assort us with their voices, put us to rights. The mind may be settled even as feathers are settled.”

Lady Simcoe thinks she has said as much already, and she would thrust her sharp-tipped face into the soft side of Miss Cowper so as to remind her of the precedent.

Captain Brant says, “They have one voice.”

Charles, the hitherto recessive Steward, steps forth—a male figure with a basket—and dissents. “They exercise peck-right.”

“Peck-right?” asks Natty.

“There is a chief hen,” allows the Cornplanter, “and there is a top hen. Subordination is inescapable. They conceive one of them above the rest.”

“They snug like soft cobbles in the purple light,” dissents Anne. She would allude to the behaviour of wilder rocks, not cobbles, but what she would say and what she can say coexist like the pine needle and its adumbration. Some people speak precisely from the start, but Anne’s tongue is vaguer.

Anne adds, “Vagueness undoes subordination.” She thinks something like this: a certain irreparable faultiness in the faculty that chooses for us

our flow of extemporaneous words makes the better speaker the worse because he pauses to repair and improve our offering, which needs no such attention. He stops and stoops to flatter himself with his superiority, and we surpass him in the revision we ourselves make with light hearts to the helpfulness of his hint, which is as compulsive on his part as his freedom from error. If he is right, we become even righter. He has, you see, to free himself from our error. This error is never decisive.

Lady Simcoe says, “Even so they follow an order, it is sure, and I concur in the opinion of these gentlemen, familiar as they are with chickens.” She brushes a hand over the faint figures of the Seneca leader, the Mohawk leader, and Charles, the once upon a time thief of poultry in England.

“Oh their voices,” says Charles, tickled by them and by the idea of Elizabeth’s hand. He loves a man’s hand, but a woman’s hand is always very surprising. He likes women’s hands a great deal. Whatever you say, man or woman, your hand has something else to say. He wonders if he could tell a man’s hand from a woman’s if they were offered to him in the dark like the lumpen shapes of the hens in their large glimmer with, underneath, their raspy hot shanks and toes. He imagines that he would gladly take the man’s hand, which takes the shaft of oar and spear and spade and rifle. Yet a woman’s hand is pleasingly alien, isn’t it? We may be alike in our slumber, but our live hands differ. Or maybe, the doubt assails him, it is what he himself wants of the hand—his wish differentiates these extensions. Sometimes a hand does for everything, at other times it fails utterly.

“Peck-right means, then, hens are Tories,” alleges the Cornplanter, whether teasing or not no light falling disambiguates his expression.

Lady Simcoe smooths her sides, which are smooth more than soft. Ammonia lodges its acridity amid fat loamish and sticky coniferous breaths. The chickens are not allegorical. She would moderate Anne somehow, half quench that torch. She would bump Anne to a perch-end where fewer words might be plucked up by her from a balder patch of intelligence, where warmth would be missing from a flank of her at the extremity of the row, of thought. Who knows but the Lady’s will assures Anne cannot accurately say what in clucking undertones comes to her and not in the words of men and women.

Cassie says, “Order there is to be sure. The order of things and of persons. But what a lie to declare that a fatality. To experience a station in a provisional scheme . . .”

Charles would seem to nod. He clasps and re-clasps his basket, handling it as he has handled his flask, which he has lately relinquished. He stands by Anne, and they run together like egg yolks. No, like a chick or two chicks they devour ambiently the stuff round them to elaborate themselves inside their nourishing sphere.

Cassie stretches her arms wide as shuffling hens do when they process up the ramp to leap down into the coop's reclusion. "People overlook the wide sides of things," she suggests. To affirm her, downy night stretches far off on either wing of her.

Says Thayendanega (that strategist), "We make flanking movements even when we do not stir a limb."

"Sleep," says Anne, yawning so her teeth brighten the night and the idea of her lips expands in the imagination. She swallows night heartily. "Sleep is a flanking movement. Day cannot get at it yet is encircled by it."

"As the Ancients thought the Ocean Stream encircled land," says Charles.

Sleepily says Anne, "Our life is large!"

She does not say that the night is like the words she would say. She reabsorbs them in the germinal form of the hens' murmur. Nothing those creatures utter is sterile, laying down the standard of fertility to perceive how pervasive fecundation is.

The Cornplanter says, "The verge of sleep at going to sleep and coming from sleep is a pleasure as great as love or eating."

Looking at Elizabeth, who cannot make out her glance, Cassie asks, "Where do you reduce that in the hierarchy then?"

"Can't," says Charles.

"The point of hierarchy," ventures Lady Simcoe, "is so we know our place . . ."

Says Charles, "I hardly know my place more than myself." He gestures violently with a peculiar gentleness, and no one can see the gesture.

Cassie, ignoring Charles, grabs Elizabeth's sentence like a slumberous hen averse to stroking. "The place, Elizabeth? The place from which we depart! The king of Ithaca sets sail every night for the wanderings and is not king for the duration, or even during the day you walk about under the shade of 'Lady,' but it amounts to subversion and insurrection even to pronounce the honourific My Lady, dear Lady."

Elizabeth's expression is night's, with a faint volume of humanity in-

fused in it. It is as though roosting impended on her, hens on all sides, compression without suffocation. The ladies rest.

Says Anne, "Once it's made clear you should know your place, the freedom begins that the very insistence would have cancelled."

Thayendanega says, "I will reserve my objection . . ."

But Charles advances his thought, as he thinks sideways winding, "Now then let us be honest: just how much coziness and comfort can we actually stand?" He is thinking of hot hen next to hot hen. Solidarity is best interleaved with separation.

"One hundred and five degrees," says Lady Simcoe à propos of something. "That is the temperature that fosters the egg. Throughout it always looks the same, yet always it is different."

Thayendanega thinks Charles' question was such a good one—as good as an egg, as nourishing—and for him Lady Simcoe might as well not have spoken. He says, "Men like discomfort and seek it out, yet in the midst of discomfort hatches that delight: fatigue. We did not kill ourselves this time, boys! Our incubation is rigour. We cherish our future by threatening it with abbreviation. Hard living proves we are alive. Our birth is a matter of sheer stubbornness when, the canoe over our head like the dome of a shell, day breaks on our pangs, which are those of needful and entirely needless labour mingled together."

"Hens," says Anne in defence of that breed, "offer no stale simplicity or insipid luxury. As I look at them and think about them, I do not become tired even when I am tired, even when the essence or yolk if you will of the situation is being tired. I do not tire of it. I am not tired of it, even though I may be exhausted. Where do chickens come from?"

"The Indus valley," says Charles, who finding chickens with uncommon accuracy found himself in prison, the drab blocks of the wall close set as hens that troop and drop to roost in their coop.

"Red Jungle Fowl is the ancestor," declares Lady Simcoe, dynast and natural historian. "An alert—a brave—a diminutive and glossy bird that flies, unlike these here, with strength at her sides."

"Indian," says Thayendanega. "Chickens are native birds, yet you say we too are Indians."

"The aboriginal bird is no fool," says Elizabeth. She flexes and almost curtsies. She could herself be dropping an egg absent, however, the squawk that commemorates that strait accomplishment. "Broodiness I do feel," she

says. “The dose of the night is diffused in me, everywhere I look I look to nest.”

Anne says, pecking up Elizabeth’s first phrase, “Nor are these hens fools. Domestication,” she begins, puzzled . . .

“Which came first?” asks Cassie.

“Sleep or waking?” asks Charles, nodding like Palinurus at the helm. Lethe might wet his temples.

“Woman or man?” asks Anne.

Captain Brant proposes something from the centre of the centre of the night. “The sun,” he says, “is an egg.”

Guesses Cassie, “The sun is an egg that daily hatches the earth.”

Says the Cornplanter, “The egg therefore comes before earth, even. But is not the sun also an egg? Thus I surmise its form to be.”

“The earth,” says Thayendanagea, “grows a plumage to apply to the sun—feathery with trees and with herbs. So earth broods sun too, which broods it with soft flares in the voidness.”

“Egg incubates hen,” summarizes Charles.

“Only consider the earth is a nest egg,” says Lady Simcoe.

“Wind egg,” amends Charles, “a rare wind egg.”

“Make your egg of marble,” says Elizabeth, “if you have marble. Set it in a place where a hen may choose to lay, to encourage her to lay.”

Cassie says, “She must choose! It is the earliest of effigies, an idol, the first deity, the nest egg. Before there was an egg there was a nest egg, to provoke the egg into existence. Art came before nature.”

Charles says, “There are only eggs. Has any ever hatched?” He wonders inhaling sweetly sour trees why an egg should smell so good in a skillet. It has little to do with the sight of a shell or a chick.

Confounded as the waters of Niagara sit the hens in their amity. Their *gluck-gluck* is the sound of the turnstile through which the clouds of the night softly pass with soft friction. The moon is bald like an egg—the kind of egg a bird deposits in a cavity rather than in a coop—and the stars glitter on their black shelves like the eggs cliff-dwelling birds lay on ledges. The precocious chick runs into the shattered space disclosed by the disintegration of the shell, as though it had stepped from a hall—a very palace or basilica as commodious as any architecture we might offer the young thing. What a whiff! The splatter that defiles the face of the man in the pillory, roast fowl so savoury, accents of deciduous and coniferous blent in the breath of the

pan! The body sucks in through nostrils avid as infants the perfect food of the newborn day, the riven dome. Sancta Sophia! Yolk and chick share a yellow and little else. Who would ever guess their connection?

Anne says, "The egg is so accomplished, the hatching amounts to mere deterioration."

"Beauty of chicken, beauty of egg? Only a matter of priority," says Lady Simcoe.

"In time," explains Thayendanega perhaps to himself.

"Good time," says the Cornplanter by way of praise.

"Priorities," pluralizes Cassie. "A matter . . ."

"What comes first is convention," says the Cornplanter.

Charles says, "Hens' lustfulness lets fall eggs. The male is not necessary for lust."

Cassie says, "I believe it—that is, I believe that reverie fills the nest, broods the nest, hatches the young, and with luck fledges them."

She raises her hat, and her hair springs free like the young of the year to come.

She does not say that she is afraid every time she is called upon to kill something. Her heart quails because she sees the limited number of the rest. What has died bulks too huge to have been killed, yet she has slain it. Life is of course alive, and death very dead, and the sight of death makes us stupid. Not having seen a chick in one's life, who could visualize such a thing? The most numerous, they are as in danger of extinction equally with the fewest. Birds can count, only count the number of their eggs not many.

Says the Cornplanter, "Whatever is in the egg hath wings. The egg is the absolute contrary of wings you would think, yet we are told the planets in space roll egglike as they fly wider than any flock."

Says Charles, "Eros wears wings, and some oologists say Love pipped from an egg. Are fertile and infertile the judgments possible to make? It is a lack that gives him the power of flight."

"Phanes, Charles, I prefer to Eros," avows Cassie. "The Orphic deity of light, winged like your Eros but of neither or of both sexes, who illuminates the round of the world."

Shrugs Charles Trump the Steward in the pitchiness that eclipses his gesture, "Embyrology, Miss Sone! I have served surprising eggs to the surprised. Embryology, I was saying, is not for the squeamish."

"Every woman is a nest of eggs ambulant," announces Elizabeth, soft-

ening.

“We are given unity like eggs by our love,” suggests Thayendanega, whose name, he realizes silently, has “egg” in it. He understands why his wife embraces him but on reflection does not understand, really, why she should embrace him. She must unify herself with what completes her as smoothly as the egg’s surface. The desire and pursuit of the whole! We will adopt proxies in the course of the search.

Says the Cornplanter, “Let us confess we do not reflect overmuch on any embryo—hidden as that is. We cling to an apprehension of the outward shape. The navel is so compelling, though it betokens the separation of the embryo complete from that which completed it.”

“A chicken has no navel,” says Charles authoritatively.

“That shape addresses us with her voice, the one you apprehend,” remarks Elizabeth.

Charles murmurs, “A back. A back, black. A back, black, glowing. Glowing bright with golden wings.”

The head thrust up into the midst of eclipse generates its own light, only shut your lids. He realizes—eyes shut, but he looking round regardless in light hazy as lapping feathers—“black” and “gold” are epithets only allowed by the universe, by its altering lights. I am black now! I strike gold with a flint in my skull and may hang it like a cresset. I attract my contemporaries by no virtue of my own, only by the light of life. Do we desire dignity or virtue? Dignity is the greater of the two, or so hisses the light in the cresset I hang. Now the people of the earth may all be alive at one time, but few (so few!) are my contemporaries.

Cassie stares into the night that transmits the least tremor without communicating whence it derived, the hens’ confidences making her trust her own theory, which is, as she says now, “Night laid the egg without any partner whatever, from which Eros hatched. I suppose Phanes was a different hatchling.”

Charles concedes with an invisible face of rue, “Most Eros is technically partnerless, the Wind or Night at best is partner to it. But why should a man be bashful about the longing his body offers him like a rose on a stem?” Charles hates those who would deride it, but no one is deriding it.

Anne declares, “Eros hatches all birds. All birds are possessed by Eros.”

Charles, prisoner still in the shell of the state, stirs and defies his judges,

“The egg is older than the bird.”

Cassie says, “Orpheus sang that truth.”

Thayendanegea, exegetical for the moment, explains: “Christians insist the chicken precedes the egg, being created whole with other fowl on the same day of creation.”

“The fifth,” specifies Lady Simcoe.

Elizabeth thinks that when you love a woman, you love a living nest of eggs. She alienates herself next, from her own aperçu. What if you do not know a woman is a living nest of eggs? Most men fall in love with a face alone and think to take the rest, but that rest they cannot bear to look at properly. The face is what they join themselves to and snicker that they have taken all the rest, but they have not because they have not joined the face to the rest or the rest even to the rest of themselves.

Says Elizabeth, “Is it not true of every egg that we do not know what’s inside it? That a hen sits on it is no guarantee that a chicken will break out of it.”

Thayendanegea would seem to affirm her, “All these chickens hardly are to be reduced under the gallinaceous kind.”

He would say that the egg has less relation to cock and hen than any would guess. Now these birds get on, but none is the same; otherwise, there would be one egg and one bird. Oh to throw the word “chicken” aside as the hen turns a leaf and looks with intensity where the drape had lain. The hens here have all closed their eyes, their faces like moss on what we cannot tell, as there is so much moss obscuring it. Moss, sealed lids, relaxed brows. You could conjecture neither sight nor flight from those shapes. Not from them. Not at all.